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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 MOSCOW 000375

SIPDIS

E.O. 12958: DECL: 02/18/2020

TAGS: PGOV PREL PHUM PINR KDEM ECON RS
SUBJECT: RYAZAN REGIONAL ELECTIONS: YABLOKO QUILTS, LASHES
OUT AT RIGGED SYSTEM

Classified By: Acting Political Minister Counselor David Kostelancik.
Reason: 1.4 (b), (d).

¶11. (C) Summary: During the March 14 Ryazan Regional Parliamentary Elections, six parties will compete for 36 Oblast Duma seats. February 5 was the registration deadline for submitting signatures. Opposition parties and pundits agree that the elections will be neither free nor fair. Yabloko dropped out of the race and denounced the undemocratic election process as a reflection of a rigged system which favors United Russia. End Summary.

¶12. (C) On February 10, we drove three-hours South West of Moscow to Ryazan oblast. Ryazan city, one of Russia's oldest cities at 915 years old, is known for its architecturally-renowned Ryazan Kremlin. It is also known for the mysterious circumstances involving Russian apartment bombings in 1999 in which Russian opposition accused the FSB of organizing the incidents, by placing explosives in bags of sugar, to help Putin get elected in 2000. On March 14, candidates will compete for 36 seats in the Ryazan Oblast Duma elections. In a mixed electoral system, voters will elect 18 candidates from party lists, as well as 18 from single-mandate districts. February 5 was the registration deadline, and the local government will announce the election results on March 15.

Six Parties in the Running

¶13. (C) Six political parties are running in the elections: the ruling United Russia party; the Communist Party of the Russian Federation (KPRF); the Liberal Democratic Party of Russia (LDPR); Just Russia; Right Cause, and Patriots of Russia. Our sources agreed that the four parliamentary parties, United Russia, LDPR, KPRF, and Just Russia, would be represented in the new Ryazan Oblast Duma, and that the opposition, which is virtually nonexistent, had a slim chance. In terms of activity:

--United Russia has 18 single-mandate and 57 party list candidates. Aleksandr Gurov, an attorney who works in the press center for the environmental organization Sovetnik Legal Services told us that he did not think the elections would be free and fair and that the outcome had already been decided; "United Russia will definitely win the majority of seats." He also told us that United Russia Leader and State Duma Speaker Boris Gryzlov was in Ryazan in the end of January to meet with government bureaucrats prior to the elections, but that the visit was presumably to bolster support for his party.

--KPRF has 15 single-mandate and 17 party list candidates. We met with KPRF regional organization leaders and Oblast Duma deputies Yevgeniy Ryabko and Ivan Khrenov who described their candidates. They said that Vladimir Fedotkin, a State

Duma deputy would head the party list, followed by Alexander Tarasso, an Oblast Duma deputy, and Ryabko would be third. The candidates vary in age and a number of women, including City Duma deputy Evalina Volkova, are running, which is notable since only two women are currently serving in the Ryazan Oblast Duma. Although KPRF currently has only four seats, it expects to obtain about four single-mandate seats and five or six party list seats. Ryabko and Khrenov said that KPRF has a 24 percent rating in Ryazan Oblast while United Russia's popularity has been falling in the region (though he did not give specific figures).

--LDPR has 18 single-mandate and 57 party list candidates. We did not meet with any LPDR representatives, but Ryabko and Khrenov told us that a number of State Duma deputies top the list for the sake of name recognition even though they do not work in Ryazan.

--Just Russia has 18 single-mandate and 21 party list candidates. We did not meet with any of their representatives.

--Right Cause has 20 party list candidates. We met with Aleksandra Perekhvatova, regional organization chair and Ryazan Oblast Duma deputy. Perekhvatova has been serving in the Oblast Duma since 2005 when she won as an SPS member and she will head the Right Cause party list. She told us that her party easily obtained 10,000 more signatures than it needed to meet election law registration requirements and she thought they would get at least two seats. Perekhvatova pointed out that there are 13 women and seven men on the Right Cause party list, and predicted they would draw the

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attention of women voters. The Right Cause candidates have diverse occupational backgrounds, such as lawyers, teachers, and small business owners, and also vary widely age.

--Patriots of Russia has only 12 party list candidates. Our sources all agreed that although Patriots obtained the necessary 20,000 signatures required for non-parliamentary parties, they would not win a seat in the elections.

Yabloko Quits in Protest

¶4. (C) While KPRF's Ryabko and Khrenov claimed that Yabloko pulled out of the local elections because they could not obtain the necessary signatures, Yabloko regional organization leaders Konstantin Smirnov and Anatoliy Kivva, as well as Yabloko member Andrei Krivorotko argued that they quit in protest after receiving 16,000 signatures. These members claimed that the system was rigged against them to such a degree that they were disadvantaged. They did not think they could win any seats in a system in which United Russia and the governor used administrative resources against "non-official" opposition parties, like Yabloko. For instance, when they wanted to reserve a conference room in which to gather, they encountered problems with the local authorities. The Yabloko members admitted, however, that Yabloko was struggling to run a strong campaign with a budget deficit and that they officially only had 300 members in the region. Krivorotko, who in addition to being a Yabloko member works for News Media Russia, and Smirnov, who also works for Novaya Gazeta, told us that they would use their media connections to speak out very loudly about Yabloko's reasons for opting out of the elections. They claimed that the election results would be falsified and that United Russia would pre-determine the outcome of the elections. They did not think they would have obtained five percent of the votes within the current system since they contend the voting is so controlled. By speaking out, their primary objective is to try to initiate reforms to the electoral system.

United Russia Governor and Mayor

15. (C) Governor Oleg Kovalyov and Mayor Oleg Shishov are both members of the United Russia party. Then-President Putin nominated Kovalyov as the Ryazan governor in March 2008. Kovalyov had previously served in the State Duma since 1999 and, according to observers, was a "major United Russia figure." Mayor Shishov has been Head of the Ryazan City Administration since August 2008. Former Mayor Fyodor Provotorov was prosecuted for killing two people in a car accident in September 2006.

Election Shenanigans

16. (C) Ryazan School of Human Rights Head Sofya Ivanova and her deputy Aleksandr Bechtold, who is also a Solidarity movement leader, highlighted various under-handed tactics that the local government and United Russia have already been using to sway voters. The Ryazan city government allowed United Russia to place huge billboards in government-owned bus stops, whereas they either told opposition groups that there was no bus stop advertising space available or they dramatically inflated the rates. We saw United Russia signs posted in bus stops throughout the city. United Russia also had candidates stand outside popular shopping centers and large grocery stores handing out shots of vodka to passersby.

Ivanova claimed that this tactic was a sure way to attract the "homeless, alcoholics, and the lower class" to vote in favor of United Russia. Bechtold told us that the local government pressured its employees to vote for United Russia.

If the employees voted for other parties, they would be harassed at their workplaces or even fired. Bechtold alleged that the local government targeted the sick at hospitals and clinics, denying them medical services and medication if they did not vote for United Russia. Lastly, United Russia has been known to bring citizens from the suburbs and regions into the cities to vote en masse. Both Ivanova and Bechtold said that they have been recording these methods of coercion and they plan to publish a Solidarity report on election irregularities in the region.

Press Coverage

17. (C) Election coverage in regional press is minimal. Ryazan boasts four television channels and availability of

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both national and regional newspapers. Our sources had mixed viewpoints on freedom of the press. Perekhvatova argued that freedom of the press was healthy and that she often saw "pro-con" opinion pieces and ones critical of official positions in the press. However, Ryabkov, Khrenov, Ivanova, Smirnov, Kivva, and Bechtold all agreed that the press was not free when it came to elections. They told us that the media prevented coverage of their candidates and some newspapers charged for interviews or to rent the facility in which an interview would be held. Kivva and Smirnov, politicians with Yabloko and members of the more independent media outlets concurrently, commented that the entire mass media system had been built specifically to maintain the status quo in the region.

Lack of Freedom of Assembly

18. (C) There are pro- and anti-government demonstrations on a semi-frequent basis in Ryazan. It seems that the government prevents demonstrations whose expressed focus is government consolidation or abuses of political power, or those that advocate regime change. Bechtold mentioned that the protesters do not receive permits for any of the central locations in Ryazan, but the local authorities offer to allow them to hold their protests in parks outside the city. There is generally an excuse associated with the unavailability of

central meeting places, be it construction, a previously scheduled engagement, or an event of pro-government groups. Most protests have a large police presence, are hidden from public view, and lack media coverage. Ivanova mentioned that often agitated groups of pro-government youth counter protests and start a commotion or provoke opposition protesters. The local authorities often pin the blame of any subsequent violence on the opposition leaders. Perekhvatova, Khrenov, and Ryabkov all concurred that their parties were able to hold demonstrations, but admitted that their demonstrations had a different tone. They protest on particular issues such as pensions, veterans affairs, and memorials of holidays, instead of urging investigation of the government or political abuse of ruling parties.

Human Rights Situation

¶9. (C) Xenophobia in Ryazan is a growing problem. Bechtold commented that groups involved in promoting human rights were subject to government intervention and obstruction. Both Bechtold and Ivanova cited increasing xenophobia in the Ryazan oblast, including two recent murders of Chinese and Uzbek nationals who had been working in Ryazan. Most of this violence has been emanating from several active right-wing, neo-Nazi, ultra-nationalist groups in the suburbs which regularly engage in anti-immigrant violence and hooliganism. Bechtold and Ivanova conveyed that the youth were increasingly apathetic to politics.

Comment

¶10. (C) United Russia is likely to win the elections in Ryazan, but Yabloko's outspoken criticism may actually have a positive impact on the results. We would not be surprised if Right Cause obtains a seat. It seems that Yabloko has yet to recover from its stinging loss in the October 2009 elections.

The Ryazan elections may prove to be one of Yabloko's last opportunities to be a squeaky wheel in that region before financial and leadership woes restrict its activities.

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